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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 002506

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SUBJECT: MUHAMMAD BAHR AL-ULUM DECRIES US "BA'THIST IMPOSITION", DETAILS ISLAMIST CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

Classified By: A/PolCouns Henry S. Ensher. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY. Leading Islamic cleric and founding Da'wa party member Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum told Poloff the US was "deserting the Shia" and attempting to bring Ba'thists back to power--comments we have heard recently from other Shia interlocutors. Al-Ulum was especially incensed over an article in a leading Iraqi newspaper claiming how the US is working with the UN to secure an agreement with the resistance and return Ba'thists. We will seek to correct this perception. Al-Ulum also detailed the Islamic parties' evolution from denouncement to acceptance of democracy because they came to see democracy as a route to power. Al-Ulum made a distinction between Islamist "acceptance" of democracy versus their "belief" in and true understanding/respect for the system and concepts. Bahr al-Ulum has written extensively on the subject and is regarded as a leading Iraqi "liberal Islamist".  
END SUMMARY.

2. (C/NF) Former Governing Council member, founding Da'wa party member, and leading Islamic cleric/writer Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum met with Poloff on June 12 at his residence. Bahr al-Ulum expressed grave concerns about the Transitional National Assembly's ability to forge a constitution that satisfies all Iraqi factions, especially given the excessive demands from Kurds and Sunnis, he said. Sunnis were emboldened by clause 61c in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) that allows three provinces to veto the constitution, if each votes to do so by two-thirds.

3. (C/NF) Al-Ulum said the Kurds are trying to impose their ethnicity on the rest of the country by pressing for the Kurdish language to be one of Iraq's official languages, as it is in the TAL. Kurdish should only be official in the North.

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Bahr al-Ulum Believes USG Intent on Returning Ba'thists  
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4. (C/NF) Bahr al-Ulum became visibly agitated as he brought up the topic of Sunni/Ba'thist participation in the constitution and what he said was US support to bring them back to power. Bahr al-Ulum angrily pointed to the headline article of that day's Azzaman newspaper: "Brahimi and US Embassy Have Secret Plan to Restore Ba'thists." Al-Ulum criticized the US position towards Shia--"the children of mass graves"--who had suffered so much during the former regime and had been killed by Sunni extremists since the fall of the regime and yet have only shown restraint. Al-Ulum accused the US of imposing the 25 names submitted to the constitutional committee, 10-15 of whom, he said, were high-level Ba'thists including the former Minister of Justice Munthir al-Shawry and former Office Manager for Saddam Hussayn Akram al-Witri. Al-Ulum warned that the US policy is driving the Shia further and further into the hands of Iran, which is not good for the US or Iraq.

5. (C/NF) Poloff pushed back, noting that the US has suggested no names to the constitutional committee and has stated that 25 Sunni additions to the Constitutional Committee would be unacceptable to other communities. Poloff added that US policy is aimed at providing non-violent access to the political process for all Iraqi communities. Bahr al-Ulum and his aides urged that the USG do more to publicize this position.

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Bahr al-Ulum Discusses Islamic Parties' Concept of Democracy  
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6. (C/NF) A leading Shia Islamic thinker and proponent of liberal Islamism, as well as one of the

founding members of the Da'wa party, Bahr al-Ulum detailed to PolOff his view of Islamist parties' evolution from denouncement to acceptance of democracy.

--DEMOCRACY AND ISLAM COMPATIBLE. Iraqi Shia Islamic parties, including Da'wa, at first rejected democracy because they lacked a clear understanding of the term. Democracy was viewed as a foreign, Western, even heathen, concept--created by the "Godless Greeks" as a system of people self-government in contrast to a divine government. During the turbulent years of upheaval in Iraqi politics and the decline of the clerical class in the early 1960s, Bahr al-Ulum and his colleagues studied various governing systems to redress the exclusion and suffering Shia were experiencing. Through his study of democracy, he noted the similarity of democratic and Islamic concepts, such as shura (consultation) and rule of law.

--MEANS FOR SHIA TO GAIN POWER. Just as important as the compatibility of Islam and democracy, al-Ulum saw democracy as a means for Shia to gain power through the majority. During the 1970's in Iraq, many Da'wa factions and other Islamic parties started opening up their thought to democratic principles in part because of this realization.

--"MEANING OF DEMOCRACY" ANECDOTES. AL-Ulum used examples to explain his view of democracy. "I do not believe it is right to dance, but if we are out at a gathering, you can dance and I will not. Each one can express what he believes is right." Al-Ulum also told a story of one of the Shia's most revered figures, Imam Ali, that illustrates there is a similar concept in Islam to the democratic view that all are equal before the law.

--"ACCEPTANCE VERSUS BELIEF" IN DEMOCRACY. Bahr al-Ulum was careful to distinguish between the Islamic parties' "acceptance" of democracy as a means to ascend to power versus a system in which they truly believe. Al-Ulum acknowledged that he himself does not know if the parties truly understand the concepts or believe in them. However, al-Ulum opined that the Islamist parties would increasingly take ownership of and imbibe democratic principles through their ever-increasing exposure of it. Al-Ulum said the parties have had a taste of democracy and proclaim they support it and would be viewed by the people as "two-faced" if they backtracked from this position. Al-Ulum, however, noted that there are still widely diverging opinions on democracy within the Da'wa party itself and even more so within other Islamic parties.

17. (C/NF) Comment: Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum's accusation that the US is turning away from the Shia and seeking to impose Ba'thists, although delivered in a more agitated manner than our other Shia interlocutors, echoes the consternation we hear from them over the unfounded allegations that Sunni outreach really means a Ba'ath restoration. As we continue efforts to achieve acceptable representation for all communities, we will have to continue to clarify and explain our views to prevent this type of misunderstanding that draws from the history of repression experienced by Iraqi Shia. Bahr al-Ulum's insights on the evolution of Islamic parties' views on democracy and the remaining ambivalence towards the term--other than an expedient way to gain power--helps explain the contradictory writings of the Da'wa and other Islamists' views on democracy.

18. (C/NF) Bio Notes: Bahr al-Ulum left the Da'wa party in 1960 because he said he preferred to be a religious rather than political leader. Al-Ulum said he was very close to Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim during his time in Iraq. Al-Ulum lent support from 1960-1969 to political movements that opposed the Ba'th party even though he himself was no longer a member of any party. Al-Ulum claimed he worked with all parties except the communists and Ba'thists because he refused to work with parties with Iraqi blood on their hands. In 1969, the Ba'th regime sentenced him to death and he fled the country, first hiding out in Egypt, Kuwait, and Iran before he finally settled in London in 1970. He lived in London until the fall of the regime, during which time al-Ulum frequently lectured at London universities on Islam and democracy. Bahr al-Ulum began writing his Islamic political treatises in 1961. Al-Ulum recounted that while he traveled frequently to Iran during his time in London for work in the opposition, he is the least pro-Iran of the Islamic leaders. He was called the "American" Bahr al-Ulum because of his

defense of liberal democratic ideals.

19. (U) REO BASRA, REO MOSUL, and REO KIRKUK, minimize considered.

Jeffrey